

Drenched in sunshine for most of the year, it is easy to call South Florida "Paradise". Turquoise seas lap the shoreline and gently swaying palm trees stir in the breezes for easy living and great recreation. But there was a time this area was much less than a desirable place to live.

"WET" is South Florida in its natural state. As recently as a hundred years ago, for most of the year, the terrain was wild and wet. Hardy pioneers assumed the plentiful, large mosquitoes had to be the state bird.

Because the land is so flat, during our wet season (June thru November) water could flow from lake to lake, spill over natural river channels, and spread into flood plains. There were no barriers or canals to direct or control the path of the water.

In the aftermath of large storms, water could stand for weeks, even months and leave devastating damage and disease in the wake. During the drier months of Winter and Spring, Florida would have its own version of the dust bowl days, cows went thirsty and crops withered on parched land.

Geography forces Florida to depend on rainfall. To make our watery state more inhabitable, through the years we attempted to control the water. From 1850 to 1950 the solution was to dredge and drain the Everglades.

South Florida's extremes of hurricane, flood and drought -- combined with efforts to populate this "New Frontier" -- led the US Congress to adopt legislation creating the "Central and Southern Florida Flood Control Project" in 1948. In 1949, the Florida legislature created the "Central and Southern Flood Control District", the predecessor of the "South Florida Water Management District". In 1972, with the "Florida Water Resources Act", the state created 5 water management districts, with expanded responsibilities for regional water resource management and environmental protection. Watersheds and other natural, hydrologic and geographic features determined the 5 districts' boundaries. In 1976, voters approved a constitutional amendment giving the districts authority to levy property taxes.

South Florida Water Management District is a special taxing district with authority to collect taxes from landowners within its 16 county jurisdiction. The District's overall budget is funded by a combination of property taxes and other sources such as federal and state revenues and grants. The 16 counties, with its population of about 6 million residents and a geographic region covering 17,930 square miles, include vast areas of agricultural lands, water conservation areas, and areas of enormous urban growth and development. Today the South Florida Water Management District operates and maintains this massive project which includes 1,800 miles of canals and levees, 25 major pumping stations and about 200 large and 2000 small water control structures.

During the last century, the everglades decreased in size dramatically. Over the last 4 decades, urban development and agricultural production have flourished. At the same time, the altered natural areas became inhospitable to native wildlife. As a result, the environment began to flounder.

Current restoration projects include not only the Everglades, but also the entire ecosystem, from the upper lakes in the Kissimmee/Orlando area to Florida Bay at the South end of the Everglades. A major initiative called the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan is now under way. Once implemented, the comprehensive plan will return much of the remaining Everglades to a free flowing system.

It will provide the right amount of water and the right flow conditions to the Everglades while providing water for the urban and agricultural needs for a 50-year population projection. With the collective efforts of our federal partners, the Army Corp of Engineers, and our state partners, the Department of Environmental Protection, we are committed TODAY to shape the Florida our children will have tomorrow.